

2 Applying to Law School

Today, there are approximately 1.3 million lawyers in the United States. The legal profession is a \$246 billion industry. There are over 169,000 legal establishments and 163,000 law offices across America. That translates into one lawyer for every 313 people living in the nation, a per capita rate that surpasses all other countries. Although the pace of U.S. legal practice has slowed and fewer students are going into law school than in past years, there are plenty of law schools to meet existing demand since there are over two hundred American Bar Association–accredited institutions in the United States. The rapid expansion of the Internet presents even more nonconventional distance learning options for legal training. In light of the sheer magnitude of the American legal profession, it is not surprising that legal scholar Mary Ann Glendon once quipped that we are truly a nation under lawyers.¹

Taking stock of the current state of the American legal profession is important for anyone seriously contemplating law study and legal practice. As two legal researchers explain, “One cannot understand the functions of law in our society without understanding who lawyers are, who they represent, and what they do.”² In that spirit, what follows is a thumbnail sketch of the profession in terms of information and issues that are important to know about in the early stages of thinking about a legal career and making the decision to apply to law school. The discussion first introduces students to the legal profession by giving an overview of contemporary legal education and the nature of law schools, lawyer demographics, legal practice settings, and the key issue of financing a legal education. Thereafter, the process of preparing for a law career is explained by analyzing prelaw undergraduate studies and some of the considerations that are significant in choosing a law school. The chapter concludes by briefly outlining the steps and implications of applying once the decision to go to law school is made.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE AMERICAN LEGAL PROFESSION

In the United States, becoming a lawyer most often necessitates going to graduate school after completing a four-year undergraduate education. Ordinarily, but not exclusively, students opt to attend a law school that is accredited by the American Bar Association (ABA), the leading national organization of licensed lawyers. For a variety of reasons, a few students choose to attend a non-ABA-accredited law school or to secure a legal education by apprenticeship (law office study that may still require some law school training, depending on the jurisdiction) or, in Wisconsin, diploma privilege (bar admission after graduating from an in-state law school) (discussed in Chapter 3). After law school, graduates must be granted a professional license to

practice law if that is their intention, a process that is controlled by state bar licensing authorities that are supervised by the state or jurisdiction's court of last resort.³

Law graduates do not need to pass the bar if they wish to engage in nonlegal employment, though many do anyway. One of the most useful aspects of getting a legal education is that it gives graduates a functional degree that inherently gives degree holders the flexibility to apply it to a wide range of law-related occupations as well as nonlegal vocations, including those in the public or private sectors such as government jobs or employment in business areas. Scholars thus observe that “[a] law degree . . . can open doors in politics, business, law enforcement, and other fields where clear thinking and a knowledge of our nation's laws is valued.” Depending on a person's interests, strengths, and past work experience, employment opportunities within the law may be found in private law firms, corporate legal departments, and federal or state government positions. Outside of the law, law schools and law-related organizations tout the so-called JD Advantage, a shorthand description for suggesting that a law degree gives an edge over the competition in getting jobs that value legal training but do not require bar passage. In this light, a law degree may be an anchor or a complement to careers in human resources, education, health care, real estate, journalism, sports and entertainment, nonprofit advocacy, international relations, or community affairs.⁴ A law degree, as well, has plenty of heft in making lateral changes within the legal profession or, alternatively, functions as a stepping-stone for switching careers entirely. The degree's utility is especially significant because job mobility and turnover are prevalent in the legal profession: one empirical study reports that 85 percent of mid-career lawyers changed jobs at least once, and half did so at least twice⁵; and analogous research discovered that there was frequent movement between jobs, organizations, and practice settings, and lawyers who had graduated only three years earlier changed employment at least once.⁶

Lawyer Demographics

In the fall of 2016, 351,201 1L (first-year) applicants sought law school admission to U.S. law schools. Of those, 145,312 were accepted, and 37,107 matriculated. Data sent to the American Bar Association from ABA-approved law schools indicate that there is a total of 110,951 students enrolled in juris doctor (JD) programs, an almost 3 percent decline from 2015. Although in recent years fewer students have been applying to law school, the rates of matriculation for 1L students are virtually the same for 2016 (37,107) and 2015 (37,071). Among matriculants, the rate of attrition roughly averages 6,400 per year (from 2008 to 2013). For those staying in school, the 2015 class graduated 39,984 law students who then entered into the workforce, a frequency that is consistent but slightly below recent past years.⁷

These numbers raise the issue of whether achieving a traditional legal education (one that contemplates passing a bar examination in order to secure employment) remains viable, an issue legal commentators and reformers have pressed in light of the 2008 economic downturn that severely constricted the legal economy. According to estimates, every year roughly forty thousand law graduates enter the market; but there are typically only about twenty-five thousand job openings for qualified applicants passing the bar. Therefore, the glutted legal marketplace necessitates that law students must be flexible in their mind-set and approach to employment; they should, for example, consider using their legal training in nontraditional

ways that encompass taking positions in nonlegal fields, such as claims adjusting, risk or human resources management, and financial advising, or as city or town managers.⁸ The growing interest in alternative nonlegal careers is discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

While the total number of lawyers remains high and the traditional use of their legal skills remains uncertain, it is noteworthy that most attorneys concentrate their practice in mostly urban areas across only six states and one territory: New York (175,195), California (167,690), Texas (87,957), Florida (75,697), Illinois (63,060), Pennsylvania (49,644), and the District of Columbia (52,711).⁹ Although women are increasingly entering the legal profession, the gains made in gender representation are only a relatively recent phenomenon. On balance, the legal profession is homogeneous and unrepresentative. Women, as well as minorities and individuals with disabilities, face considerable equal employment challenges as well as workplace inequities. For example, by virtually every metric, male lawyers dominate legal practice not only in terms of sheer numbers, but also in holding higher-paying jobs and leadership positions in law firms, Fortune 500 companies, law school administration, and the judiciary (see Table 2.1).

Moreover, the National Association for Law Placement reported that (1) 8 percent of minorities in law firms were partners, whereas 20 percent were employed as associate attorneys, in 2015; (2) 3 percent or less of openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) lawyers worked in law firms, either as partners or as associates, in 2015; and (3) less than half of 1 percent of lawyers were disabled partners or associate attorneys in 2015. According to one study, the discrepancies in representation, compensation, and implicitly professional influence are higher in the legal profession as compared to the medical, business, and academic professions.¹⁰

Table 2.1 Women and the Legal Profession

Metric	Female	vs.	Male
Women in the Legal Profession	36%		65%
Women in Private Practice			
• Summer Associates	48%		52%
• Associates	45%		55%
• Managing Partners in 200 Largest Law Firms	18%		82%
• Equity Partners	18%		82%
• Partners	22%		78%
Women in Corporations			
• Fortune 500 General Counsel	24%		76%
• Fortune 501–1000	19%		81%

(Continued)

Table 2.1 (Continued)

Metric	Female	vs.	Male
Women in Law School Administration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deans 	31%		69%
Women in Federal Courts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. Supreme Court • U.S. Courts of Appeals • U.S. District Courts 	33%		67%
Women in State Courts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appellate Courts of Last Resort • Intermediate Appellate Courts • Trial Courts of General Jurisdiction • Trial Courts of Limited Jurisdiction 	35%		65%
Women lawyers' median weekly salary as a percentage of male lawyers' salary (2014)	83%		—
Women equity partner compensation in the 200 largest firms as compared to male partner (October 2015 report)	80%	(30 firms supplied data)	—

Source: American Bar Association, Commission on Women in the Profession, "A Current Glance at Women in the Law: May 2016," accessed May 4, 2016, from www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/marketing/women/current_glance_statistics_may2016.authcheckdam.pdf.

Note: All percentages are subject to rounding error, so column and row totals may equal 100.

Legal Practice Settings

According to the National Association for Law Placement, 51 percent of almost forty thousand law graduates in 2015 found work in private practice, whereas the remainder secured employment in business (17 percent), government (12 percent), judicial clerkship (10 percent), public interest (7 percent), or academic (2 percent) jobs.¹¹ Another study investigating thousands of attorneys who were in practice for twelve years mostly mirrors these employment trends: nearly 50 percent of lawyers still worked in private law firms, but 28 percent moved on to the public sector while 20 percent remained in business settings.¹² For graduates landing a job in private practice, over 50 percent worked in small law firms of twenty-five or fewer attorneys. In Big Law corporate firms, 23 percent were placed in firms with over five hundred lawyers. For firms with fewer than five hundred lawyers, the percentages were largely identical across large to medium-size firms: 6 percent in firms with 251–500 lawyers; 6 percent in firms with 101–250 lawyers; 5 percent in firms with 51–100 lawyers; and 6 percent in firms with 26–50 lawyers. For smaller firms,

10 percent landed in 11- to 25-lawyer-sized firms, and 40 percent were in firms with 10 or fewer lawyers. In contrast, only 4 percent reported entering into solo practice. These figures underscore other research findings that debunk the popular belief that most attorneys in private practice wind up in Big Law firms. Most simply do not. These demographics help mask but also exemplify the reality that earning a law degree is *not* a guarantee of employment, at least right after law school, especially in a large law firm. For the 2015 class, 4,224 lawyers, or 11 percent of law graduates, were unemployed or not seeking a job. As a result, many new graduates (especially in nonelite schools) struggle to find a job because the supply for entry-level positions far outpaces demand, a trend that has been exacerbated by the negative economic consequences of the 2008 recession. As legal scholar Deborah L. Rhode puts it, “there is a mismatch between supply and demand” because the “number of new law graduates substantially outstrips the entry-level jobs that are available.”¹³

Furthermore, the legal profession workplace is highly stratified and extremely specialized, especially in private practice settings. In the past, legal practice was divided along class and religious segments; but, more recently, some studies have observed that changing racial attitudes, the entry of women into the legal profession, and the growing competition for hiring the best associate attorney talent have slowed the pace of stratification and, arguably, made professional advancement hinge more on considerations of individual merit. In addition, and contrary to popular belief, most lawyers are not generalists or equipped to handle any legal problem with ease. In fact, the opposite is true. As one law professor explains, “new lawyers are prepared to handle very little and more experienced lawyers focus on narrow areas of practice.” In this respect, law practice is “so highly specialized that most lawyers, out of necessity, have to restrict their areas of practices.” Thus, as their professional career unfolds, many lawyers develop specialties that take them into well-defined areas of criminal law, international law, family law, tax law, employment law, sports law, education law, and the like.¹⁴

Moreover, savvy law applicants or students quickly perceive that their chances for achieving the best professional success (in terms of money, influence, and status in the community or profession) may pivot on finding a job in Big Law, or large corporate law firms that offer the type of resources and networking that enable driven professionals to maximize their pedigree and skills. Yet landing a high-powered job generally depends on several factors, including social pedigree (most matriculating law students are from upper-middle-class to middle-class socioeconomic status), the prestige of the law school from which a graduate is hired, and, perhaps most significantly, how well the student performed in law school. Social pedigree, once a dominant factor in explaining career outcomes, has perhaps become less influential as the legal profession has become more diversified since the mid-1990s. Consequently, *where* one goes to law school, and *how well* one does in law school, probably determine a lawyer’s career path and whether fledgling attorneys land in Big Law firms or otherwise find lucrative professional positions. As one empirical study concludes, “‘who you are’ has declined in importance as a determinant of legal careers, and ‘what you do’ matters more. What students show they can do in law school—at *all* law schools—is very closely linked to both their short-term and long-term career success.” Still, not landing in a top-tier school has its quality-of-life advantages because many lawyers are extremely satisfied and personally happy in their choice to

attend less renowned schools since their employment puts fewer demands on their time and is less stressful.¹⁵

Regardless, common sense and many academic studies indicate that graduates from prestigious law schools are more likely to wind up in large law firms, whereas students from less distinguished schools are relegated to mid-size to small law firms. The elitism of law study—which traditionally has been closely tied to the applicant's social origins—registers that admission to law school, and the law training process itself, stratifies attorneys into “haves and have-nots” classifications that inevitably factor into job placement trends and whether new lawyers find themselves in the best position to reap tangible and intangible professional rewards as their careers progress. As one legal scholar ironically observes, Big Law “firms do have a disproportionate amount of power both within and outside the legal profession even though they comprise a relatively small percent of the lawyers in America.”¹⁶ Not surprisingly, an empirical study tracking the careers of elite and nonelite lawyers determined that the wage gap, which is quite substantial between the two groups, “begins the moment that lawyers start out the gate, and persists over time.”¹⁷

Apart from private practice, only a small percentage of lawyers take public interest jobs or become judges or law teachers. Fewer law graduates pursue nonlegal careers, and sometimes only by necessity. In this regard, a large percentage of law graduates find positions in the business sector, and oftentimes being a licensed lawyer is not a job requirement. Having a law degree, though, is a plus (if not a necessity) for finding work in nontraditional employment settings, such as with online legal service companies like LegalZoom and Practical Law, or, alternatively, in lobbying, accounting, and management consulting firms. These employment trends are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.¹⁸

Lawyer Salaries

The starting salaries of law graduates are variable and contingent upon the nature of employment, economic conditions, and where employment is secured.¹⁹ In general terms, data from the National Association for Law Placement (NALP) provide a broad sense of historical trends and salary variation. Between 2008 and 2015, the median starting salary for lawyers declined from \$72,000 to \$64,800, a by-product of the Great Recession. In 2008, the law firm median starting salary was \$125,000; but, in 2015, it was \$100,000. Furthermore, salaries are commensurate with the bigness of the law firm because working in larger firms results in increased earning capacity. Median salaries have also grown over time. In 1995, the median starting salary of first-year associates was \$45,000 for lawyers in 2- to 25-attorney firms; \$50,000 (26–50 attorneys); \$59,500 (51–100 attorneys); \$58,500 (101–250 attorneys); and \$70,000 (251 or more attorneys). By 2014, it was \$68,000 (2–25 attorneys); \$105,000 (26–50 attorneys); \$110,000 (51–100 attorneys); \$105,000 (101–250 attorneys); and \$135,000 (251 or more attorneys).²⁰

While being cognizant of reports of average or median salaries is important, what the numbers purport to represent must be weighed against the problems associated with unreported data, inflationary trends, or other marketplace nuances. In the spirit of full disclosure, some nonprofit organizations try to present a more accurate picture by publishing salaries and other employment outcome data that are reported from law graduates at specific schools; for example, Law School

Transparency publishes these data in its online “LST Score Reports.”²¹ In addition, NALP reports, along with other academic studies, show that lawyer salaries today are best understood in a bimodal distribution; that is, “salaries cluster at either side of the average,” and “relatively few salaries are near the average” in most recent years. For the 2014 class, the distribution of salaries fell with two general “peak” ranges relative to Big Law positions and the balance of law graduates. About 17 percent of jobs paid \$160,000, whereas about half of reported salaries were in the \$40,000–\$65,000 range.²² Other scholars, as well, have interpreted the NALP data in similar terms while underscoring that since 2006, the salary “gap between the Big Law humps and everyone else is extremely pronounced,” a circumstance that implies that “[a] student who hoped to work at a big law firm and ends up in a small firm will be disappointed indeed.”²³

Another consideration in weighing lawyer salaries is that the competition for the best new attorney talent is fierce, especially in the private practice sector. In 2016, an elite law firm, Cravath, Swaine & Moore, announced that it was raising the annual salary for its first-year recruits from \$160,000 to \$180,000, a move that put pressure on other Big Law firms to follow suit lest they lose a chance to hire the nation’s best law graduates. Yet the salary adjustment is the first increase to high-powered associate pay in over a decade, and it comes amid the growing recognition by elite law firms that they can no longer afford to let deep-pocket but disgruntled clients absorb the costs of delegating high-priced legal work to junior associates. The change in behavior allowed partner profits to rise and made the pay increase possible once more experienced attorneys in the firm handled the high-producing revenue files. Notably, though, if other elite law firms decide to match the pay increase, it only applies to a small percentage of the legal industry. Only a few law graduates begin their careers with mid-\$100,000 starting salaries.²⁴

Furthermore, where one finds work is significant. Apart from law firms, the median salaries of 2015 graduates were higher in the business and industry sector (\$70,000) but lower in the government (\$55,000), academic (\$50,000), and public interest (\$47,000) employment settings.²⁵ While some lawyers undoubtedly earn big paychecks, it is worth bearing in mind that many do not. Compared to past years, income levels are generally declining, in part due to competitive pressures. Some observers, in fact, go so far as equating lawyers’ earnings to those working in other lower-salaried professional callings, such as high school teachers (\$53,230), accountants and auditors (\$61,690), architects (\$72,550), and civil engineers (\$77,560).²⁶

Student Loan Debt

Another (but not the last or only) consideration in evaluating the current state of the legal profession relates to the specter of paying back student loan debts, whether they are accumulated in undergraduate or law school, or both. Clearly, the cost of attending law school has to be carefully weighed against the remunerative (and intangible) benefits of earning a legal education. Making that assessment has to be done in light of the reality of high tuition rates and the cost of attendance in a contemporary legal marketplace that is not always a predictable or reliable source of employment. Not all students need to finance their education, but many do.

Students not considering the issue beforehand are often shocked to learn how expensive it is to attend graduate school. There is little doubt that tuition rates have

skyrocketed in the past thirty years. In 1985, the median tuition rate for public law schools was \$1,792 for residents and \$4,786 for nonresidents; for private schools, it was \$7,385. By 2013, it grew to \$22,209 for residents going to public schools and \$33,752 for nonresidents. And, for private schools, it rose to \$42,241.²⁷ Beyond the tuition rate, the cost of attendance (which typically includes living expenses, such as room and board, fees, books and supplies, transportation, and miscellaneous personal expenses) must be factored into the calculation of whether it is wise or necessary to assume student loan debt. According to the American Bar Association, for single students living on campus, the average cost of living and book expenses rose from roughly \$5,000 per year in 1990 to \$15,000 by 2012–2013²⁸; and, at a minimum, students financing their legal education will borrow between an average of about \$85,000 (for public law schools) and \$122,000 (for private law schools) over the course of their study, or an average of about \$32,000 (public) to \$44,000 (private) per year.²⁹ In all likelihood, as the nonprofit entity Law School Transparency indicates, the ABA's data underestimate the true cost of attendance because going to law school entails incurring a variety of expenses, and opportunity costs, that are not easily foreseen without advance, and diligent, investigation by prospective students.³⁰

The lingering impact of educational debt, and how it affects a level of professional satisfaction (or regret) that is felt over time, is perhaps the most critical factor in deciding whether to go law school. In a national longitudinal study of several thousand U.S. law graduates who were admitted into the bar in 2000, researchers reported that 47 percent had zero educational debt after twelve years of legal practice and that only 5 percent had \$100,000 (or more) of debt remaining at the end of that time. But the findings also showed that lawyers working in law firms with 101–249 or over 250 attorneys were the most likely to have paid down their debt entirely and that although certain lawyers, such as those in public interest, nonprofit, education, and federal government jobs, successfully paid off educational debt, lawyers in solo practice, state government, legal services, or public defender positions struggled and were the least likely to do so. In addition, after twelve years of legal practice, the median debt was roughly \$50,000; but, significantly, that educational debt was harder to pay off and lingered more for blacks, Hispanics, and Asians (but not whites).³¹

The decision to assume student loan debt is further complicated by other intangibles and realities that are an integral part of the law school admission process. Law schools, for example, offer internal grants in aid, scholarships, and tuition discounts that may be awarded to students, depending on how their application and underlying credentials are weighed by the admission committee. Due to the competitive pressures of enrollment and the law school ranking system (discussed later in this chapter), oftentimes less renowned or nonelite schools use these tools as a recruitment incentive in the hopes of attracting better students and graduates who, in time, may improve the school's reputation. A controversial incentive, such as conditional scholarships, may be offered at the time of admission: thus, a student is given a financial award, but it is conditioned and retained only if the student maintains a certain grade point average or class standing (other than remaining in good academic standing). Criticizing these as "bait and switch" tactics, the American Bar Association now mandates that accredited law schools must disclose, through so-called Standard 509 Information Reports, whether they offer conditional scholarships and, if so, how many have been lost due to the inability to

fulfill the conditions for retaining awards (and therefore students must find other means to pay tuition to stay in school, like student loans).³²

Finally, for those taking on educational debt, students are most likely to take out loans from the federal government, such as Stafford Loans or Direct PLUS Loans, or from private lenders such as Citizens Bank, Social Finance (SoFi), or Common Bond. While some students opt for private lenders (which have more rigid payment terms and less forbearance flexibility), many students choose loans from the federal government because it offers a variety of repayment options based on income or other factors that assist with paying down debt; or, in some instances, loan forgiveness programs are in place to erase some or all of the debt that is accumulated after a period of time. That option is available for certain types of post-law school employment, such as working in public interest or teaching organizations.³³ Even so, and although students with limited means may be able to subsidize most if not all of their legal education, critics observe that repaying large loan amounts is often very difficult, if not “crippling,” simply because more than 40 percent of law graduates will not make enough money in their first position to service the debt adequately.³⁴

PREPARING FOR LAW SCHOOL: “PRELAW” UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES

Aspiring lawyers must approach the task of preparing for law school with a “seriousness of purpose” and a keen ability to make the necessary time investment to gather, and carefully evaluate, relevant information about the law school admission process and what it takes to be successful and happy after matriculation and bar passage. Prelaw students must keep a detached, objective, and critical eye on the self-assessment process in order to be in the best position to “yield lifetime rewards and avoid enduring mistakes.”³⁵ Since studies show that matriculating students overestimate their success in law school, it is logical to think that the same mistake is likely to happen if unrealistic choices are made about where to send applications (it will also be a costly error, as applying to law school is not especially cheap). A key player in law school admissions, the Law School Admission Council (discussed later), reminds students that roughly half of applicants apply to five or fewer schools, a metric suggesting that many enrollees are thoughtfully taking into account a wide range of personal and academic considerations before applying; but, still, the rest apparently are not as careful.³⁶ Clearly, critical decisions that affect a lifetime should only be made after students fully understand the pros and cons of applying to law school and becoming a legal professional. After discussing what type of undergraduate or prelaw study is beneficial to law school preparation, this section analyzes some of the practical considerations and logistics of applying to, and choosing, the best law school.

Prelaw Undergraduate Study

A common misconception is that there is a recommended undergraduate curriculum for law school—one that “best” prepares students for law study. The American Bar Association, as well as the Law School Admission Council (a key resource for learning about law study, the law school application process, and lawyering), does not recommend students choose any specific undergraduate majors or group

of courses to prepare for a legal education.³⁷ In reality, there is no “prelaw” degree; instead, schools typically subsume their prelaw programs into another degree. In this context, many students elect to major in political science (or take a healthy dose of poli-sci courses) because it gives students a special grounding in understanding American government, legal institutions, and the judicial process (see Table 2.2). This common-sense approach to prelaw studies is echoed by legal reformers who argue that judicial or legal process courses, with others that introduce students to the law, legal reasoning, legal systems, and the legal profession, must be structured into prelaw prerequisites that are enforceable through ABA accreditation standards and, perhaps, passing a qualifying examination. Establishing prerequisites and compelling a prelaw qualifying examination would help students decide their career path as well as filter out unqualified applicants. Even so, until reform is enacted, the unstructured curriculum norm in prelaw studies puts the onus on students to determine what undergraduate courses will best prepare them for the rigors of graduate school and legal training.

As Table 2.2 indicates, many law school applicants predominantly major in political science but also gravitate toward majoring in subjects within liberal arts disciplines. Other traditional options that the ABA lists for law preparation include history, English, philosophy, economics, and business majors or courses; but it adds that law students ultimately come from a diverse and fairly open-ended range of undergraduate backgrounds from art and music to science, mathematics, and engineering. This latter ABA observation is consistent with an empirical study’s finding that science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) and economics, accounting, and finance (EAR) majors are especially useful predictors of law school success. Further, law professor Derek Muller’s research similarly reports that certain majors, among them physics, math, art history, and linguistics, are near the top of a pool of majors that earned high undergraduate grade-point average (UGPA) and Law School Admission Test (LSAT) scores, and that classics, math, linguistics, art history, physics, philosophy, and economics majors had the best UGPA and LSAT scores among law school matriculants.³⁸ While there is no guarantee that declaring those types of majors will lead to law admission or law school grade accomplishment, students must strive to do well in any major they choose, and not only take courses that are intellectually challenging but also hone analytical reasoning, oral communication, and writing skills. Being diligent academically, moreover, will also pay off for students who can take advantage of 3+3 programs if they are offered by a student’s undergraduate institution. Such programs permit undergraduates to apply to and begin law school after three years, if certain requirements are met. Upon completion of the first year in law school, the applicant graduates from the undergraduate level and then completes the second and third years of law school, which has the effect reducing the overall years (and costs) of academic study.³⁹

In weighing the different options, students often seek information from the undergraduate institution’s prelaw adviser, who may be a part of a specific academic program (e.g., prelaw, legal, or paralegal studies) or more generically located in the administrative structure of university or college advising offices or specific departments. Prewal advisers help identify relevant law-related resources and assist advisees in the application process. Typically, they provide guidance in suggesting relevant coursework and supply key information about how to register for the

Table 2.2 Most Popular Undergraduate Majors for Law School Applicants, 2015–2016

Rank	Major	Total Applicants	Number Enrolled	Percentage Enrolled
1	Political Science	12,693	9,030	71.14%
2	Criminal Justice	3,857	2,106	54.60%
3	Psychology	3,778	2,564	67.87%
4	English	3,549	2,437	68.67%
5	History	3,472	2,561	73.76%
6	Economics	2,717	1,943	71.51%
7	Philosophy	2,294	1,736	75.68%
8	Arts & Humanities	2,135	1,444	67.63%
9	Sociology	2,055	1,266	61.61%
10	Communications	1,809	1,195	60.06%
11	Business Administration	1,554	850	54.70%
12	Finance	1,468	980	66.76%
13	Liberal Arts	1,311	775	59.12%
14	Business Management	1,085	624	57.51%
15	International Relations	1,026	754	73.49%
16	Accounting	962	561	58.32%
17	Criminology	931	562	60.37%
18	Spanish	906	659	72.74%
19	Marketing	902	591	65.52%
20	Biology, General	744	497	66.80%

Source: Law School Admission Council, “Applicants by Major: Undergraduate Majors of Applicants to ABA-Approved Law Schools,” accessed August 5, 2016, from www.lsac.org/lisacresources/data/applicants-by-major.

LSAT, the Law School Admission Council (LSAC), and the Credential Assembly Service, as well as aid students in completing the online application process. Prelaw advisers are a good resource for learning how to apply for financial aid, and often they supervise or work with prelaw clubs, undergraduate moot court or mock trial

programs, and law firms or organizations that have internships. A prelaw adviser may also have key contacts or ongoing relationships with law schools and law-related alumni, which gives students the chance to attend law school recruiting events or develop a network of professional resources that cannot be obtained or gleaned through online resources.⁴⁰

Regardless of the chosen major, in selecting coursework it is advantageous for students to opt for challenging courses that help develop the types of skills that are linked to being a lawyer or the legal profession itself. The ABA-LSAC identifies seven basic skills that lawyers use in the practice of law: reading and listening, analyzing, synthesizing (the law), advocating, counseling, writing and speaking, and negotiating. Although lawyers may use some skills more than others, the legal training they receive establishes the foundation they need to analyze legal issues relative to the law's current state, and thus to advise clients appropriately about what the law requires and how it may affect them in the case at hand or in the future. In addition, lawyers play different roles in the delivery of legal services, so the skills they acquire must include learning how to negotiate and advocate positions well and to communicate lucidly in a written and oral fashion.⁴¹

This prelaw advice reinforces the notion that the skill set that ought to be developed at the undergraduate level is cultivated by courses that allow students to refine their abilities to engage in problem solving, critical thinking, research, writing, and oral communication. As a result, coursework that exposes students to American politics, American political thought (and constitutional history), the judicial process, sociology, financial analysis, business management, philosophy, literature, ethics, and international relations is typically a good foundation for law study. With these types of courses, prelaw students establish a solid grounding in not only abstract concepts of human behavior; historical, societal, or cultural development; and general politics, but also practical skills of mathematics and business acumen.⁴²

On another dimension, students should be cognizant of taking courses that expose them to college-level (or life) experiences that cultivate an awareness that the practice of law is a *profession*, and one that has clear expectations and obligations about how to act appropriately in rendering legal services. Learning professional competence is essential because lawyers are routinely asked to make difficult choices about how to give objective, and emotionally detached, advice to clients who are often in a crisis mode and cannot think too clearly about the situation at hand. While it may be too much to expect that undergraduate prelaw studies can adequately familiarize students with the values underlying legal professionalism (after all, in theory, that is what law schools should be doing), it is never too early to begin to develop a mind-set in college that prepares students for the types of advising and transactional lawyering roles they are likely to assume in legal practice. In this respect, prelaw students should develop a curriculum that trains them to learn how to remain ethical in legal practice; to become effective listeners, communicators, investigators, advocates, problem solvers, and advisers; and, in the twenty-first century, to become proficient in using relevant and rapidly evolving technologies.⁴³

Beyond coursework, many students interested in law consult a wide range of books that reveal what it is like to go to law school, be a lawyer, and work in the legal profession. For students who do not personally know a lawyer or have a relative in the

legal profession, working through a prelaw book list—which might include learning what Harvard Law School is like from Scott Turow’s *One L* or reading about the litigation history behind the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) in Richard Kluger’s *Simple Justice*—is invaluable because it provides special insights about the law that cannot be learned in college courses.⁴⁴ These resources, as well, can be read in conjunction with taking part in internships (if offered during undergraduate study) or informal discussions with legal professionals and law school alumni about their own experiences in the law and the legal profession as a whole. Once a general familiarity of the law and legal practice is gained, then prelaw students must decide to prepare for and take the LSAT, a key element of the law school admission process.

The Law School Admission Test

A precondition for attending an ABA-accredited law school is performing well on the Law School Admission Test (LSAT). While the test can be taken after college, in many instances students begin to prepare for it in the last two years of their undergraduate education. Along with earning a strong UGPA, doing well on the LSAT is essential even though law schools purport to take a holistic approach to making law school admission decisions. As one law school dean explains, UGPA and LSAT scores are significant, but “they are only one of several pieces of the law school application puzzle.” In this respect, admissions committees weigh all parts of the application, and the importance of any factor that determines an admission or denial “depend[s] on the strengths and weaknesses of the application as a whole.”⁴⁵ Such factors include undergraduate curriculum and college attended, graduate work, grade improvement and grade distribution, extracurricular activities, ethnic or racial background, individual character and personality traits, letters of recommendation, writing skills, personal statement, work experience or other postundergraduate experiences, community activities or volunteer work, impetus and reason for wanting to study law, state of residency, any obstacles that have been surpassed, past accomplishments and leadership capacity, conditional admissions programs, and other distinctive aspects of the application.⁴⁶

Contrary to popular belief, the LSAT does not test a person’s substantive knowledge of the law. Rather, the LSAT is highly significant as an admission metric because its primary function is to evaluate the likelihood of an applicant’s success in law school through testing an ability to perform the type of skills that lawyers routinely use in their legal practice. These include reading comprehension; managing, synthesizing, and making inferences from complex information and legal materials; critical thinking; and analyzing logical arguments. In terms of format, the LSAT is a multiple-choice test that consists of five 35-minute sections (four of which are scored), with a 35-minute unscored writing sample that is taken at the end of the exam (which is not scored, but forwarded to law schools where applications are sent). The multiple-choice design has three question types: reading comprehension, analytical reasoning, and logical reasoning. Whereas the reading comprehension section features three long and two short comparative reading passages, the analytical reasoning part has four logic games and short arguments, respectively.⁴⁷

The LSAT score is generated from the number of correct answers, with no deduction for wrong answers. Individual questions are not weighted differently either. The lowest score is 120, and the highest is 180. After the test, the LSAC compiles an

LSAT Score Report, which includes the results of all tests (up to twelve) for which an applicant registered since June 1, 2011 (including absences and cancellations). Students ordinarily cannot take the LSAT more than three times in a two-year period, though the LSAC may grant exceptions. If there is more than one reportable score on record, the LSAT Score Report averages them but also lists them separately. Further, the report includes a percentile rank, or the percentage of LSAT takers whose scores were lower than the applicant's in question in the preceding three testing years. Test takers can expect their LSAT Score Reports to be received by email within three to four weeks following the test.⁴⁸

While the LSAT is offered in four possible test months (June, September, December, and February), the most popular time to take the LSAT is in June or September of the year before the law school start date. For students engaged in foreign study, the test can be taken abroad, and there are alternative test days to accommodate religious observance. Taking the LSAT earlier will afford more time to prepare the law school applications, a time-consuming process in and of itself, especially if applicants are still in undergraduate school. As the LSAC notes, many law schools mandate that the LSAT be taken by December at the very latest to qualify for the next fall admission cycle. In order to take the LSAT, students must follow the procedures to register for it, a process that requires not only an investment of time but also the payment of fees by the appropriate deadlines. The first step for registration is to create an LSAC account (<https://os.lsac.org/Release/Logon/Access.aspx>), which permits LSAT registration and access to other LSAC services, such as the LSAC Credential Assembly Service (CAS; a onetime documentation submission procedure that lets the LSAC forward to each law school transcripts, letters of recommendation, and other credentials, instead of applicants doing it piecemeal by themselves), early notification of LSAT scores, buying test preparation materials, and attending LSAC-sponsored Law School Forums (recruiting events). Virtually all ABA-approved law schools require that applicants register for the LSAT *and* the CAS, so applicants should be mindful of and familiarize themselves with all of the basic and auxiliary fees associated with LSAC services. For 2016–2017, the basic fees for LSAT registration totaled \$180, and the CAS cost \$175. Other miscellaneous auxiliary fees include filing law school reports (\$30), late registration (\$90), test center or date changes (\$90 each), hand scoring (\$100), and the like. Under certain limited conditions, the LSAC permits fee waivers.⁴⁹

Regardless of when the LSAT is taken, it is sound advice for students to only take it after sufficient and thorough preparation leading up to the test date. Although some studies report that LSAT scores predict law school success more weakly than having a strong UGPA, there is little doubt that high LSAT scores figure predominantly into admission committee decision making. Research, on balance, shows that the LSAT is a relatively reliable measurement of law school performance. Lower scores (those typically under 150) will have to be offset (and explained) by other positive elements of the application, such as a high UGPA or significant contribution to the community through volunteer work and the like. As a rule of thumb, because the test is so critical to the application process, students should take it under an assumption that their best score will happen after taking it only once. While the test can be retaken, it is costlier and time-consuming to do so, and there is no guarantee that the score will improve.⁵⁰

There are basically two ways to prepare for the test (either in-person or online): through self-help (using commercial preparatory books that are available from the LSAC) or by using a commercial test preparation service (that has a combination of online, in-class, and personal tutoring options). In terms of self-help, the LSAC and other vendors give online access to sample test questions (and test preparation videos) and the chance to buy practice tests at a fairly minimal cost. While neither method is foolproof or a guarantee of success, the self-study option is the most cost-effective and most helpful for those who have not used a commercial test preparation service in the past for other types of standardized testing that are required for academic admissions. The commercial test preparation alternative may work better for students who need more structure and guided assistance to their study; also, such courses are beneficial resources for learning techniques to identify question types and strategies to solve them that are put into practice by the instructors—something that might not be achieved from self-study. Yet, they can be expensive and in some instances cost-prohibitive, as prices typically range in the hundreds to thousands of dollars. In weighing the decision to pay for commercial test preparation services, it is advisable for prelaw students to take some practice tests initially and then, when ready, take a timed test under mock testing conditions at least a few times. If the mock test scores are poor or in need of improvement, then using a commercial test preparation vendor may be a wise choice (with, of course, no guarantee of improvement or an acceptable LSAT score). Regardless of the chosen method, it is almost foolhardy to believe that a respectable LSAT performance will result from the poor decision to begin preparing for it at the last minute or close to the time the test is first taken. Only familiarity and a complete understanding of the test directions, test format, time constraints, and test-taking strategies through much practice will maximize the test results, something that typically takes a fair to large investment of time and plenty of hard work.⁵¹

Selecting the “Right” Law School

Once preparation for the LSAT has begun, and if they already have not done so, students should start to investigate what law school options are available to them in light of their personal circumstances, expectations, and goals about entering the legal profession or receiving law-based training. Of course, the actual decision to attend a specific school probably will not be made until the end of the application process or after the first acceptance letter arrives. Further, the choice about where to attend is made easier by economic, job, or family necessities or the fact that one may opt to go to a particular school because of limited acceptances to first preferences or a spate of denials that limit choice.⁵² Nonetheless, searching for the “right” law school early on in the process (whether in undergraduate school or not) has the advantage of gathering key facts that is a natural (and indispensable) part not only of the self-examination process, but also of making an informed—and “best”—choice when the time comes. After all, as one legal scholar puts it in explaining the significance of making the right selection, “[n]ot only will the choice influence the next three years of your life, but it may also very well determine what type of law you practice, how you practice it, and how much you enjoy being a lawyer.”⁵³

The process of choosing a law school can only be accomplished by a thorough examination of the law schools themselves. An often cost-effective and convenient

resource for learning about law schools is LSAC's Law School Forums, events that are attended by multiple law schools at regional locations across the nation for the purpose of educating students about the law school admission process.⁵⁴ One of the first steps in doing research about law schools is to determine if an institution is ABA accredited, as that is often a requirement to sit for a state bar examination.⁵⁵ Relatedly, appropriate thought must be given to identifying the location where the practice of law is likely to commence. While law degrees in and of themselves are quite functional and relatively portable across states (and sometimes bar passage is not required for employment, as noted earlier), it is often helpful to select a law school that is linked to the likely location of law practice, simply because law schools may help bar passage by having a state-friendly curriculum, access to resources, or other "in state" advantages that facilitate bar study or bar passage within a state. As well, the applicant's personal circumstances may necessitate living close to family, friends, or legal contacts that are gained in the course of growing up or living in the area for an extended period of time. While it is not always the case, it may be difficult for students who attend law school in California to do well in sitting for a bar examination in New York. What was taught and emphasized in California law schools over the course of three years—and what was learned during that time about that state's judicial system, rules of court, and substantive state law—might not be especially useful in trying to understand, and apply, similar information that is essential to know in passing the New York state bar examination. Virtually all bar examinations have components that test the familiarity and application of legal procedures and laws that are unique to the legal practice in the state. Accordingly, carefully thinking about where the bar will be taken probably should be part of the reasoning about where to attend law school.

Researching what law schools have to offer can be accomplished by reviewing individual law school websites that are available for review by the LSAC (www.lsac.org) and from the law schools themselves. The LSAC provides a full range of information, services, and programs relating to the legal profession and law schools (including, as mentioned earlier, law school recruitment forums, but also applicant profile grids, an online tool that is tailored to identifying law schools based on applicant UGPAs and LSAT scores). Also, the LSAC administers the LSAT and hosts a credentialing and candidate referral service that is part of the admissions process. The online tools supplied by the LSAC should be used in conjunction with taking a more detailed look at what each law school has to offer, a task that is easily accomplished by accessing the school's webpages.⁵⁶

In reviewing these sites, students discover there are a variety of law school typologies, ranging from the *size* of the law school; to being educated in an institution from a public, private, independent, or faith-based perspective; to the law school's *location*, among others. Size and location are often critical factors, especially from undergraduates coming from smaller (or larger) school environments who have become accustomed to certain lifestyles or expectations in academic life. In general, there are several standard criteria to use in investigating specific schools, including the size, composition, and diversity of the student body; the location, size, and nature of the surrounding community; the law school's curriculum; the general atmosphere of the school; the availability of housing; the pedigree and expertise of the faculty; whether clinical programs or classroom experience is emphasized; the offerings of

the library and the professionalism of the staff who manage them; whether there is a part-time or evening program; the track record and competence of career services; the nature of any specialty or joint-degree programs offered; and what types of law review, honor (i.e., Order of the Coif), moot court, or other law-related organizations (i.e., chapters from the Federalist Society or similar advocacy groups) are available as extracurricular activities.⁵⁷

As a recent innovation, another source of key consumer information—the ABA Standard 509 Information Reports, mentioned earlier (www.abarequireddisclosures.org)—compels law schools to reveal a wide range of data that help aspiring law students evaluate schools before they apply. By reviewing the reports, students can learn about a school's public or private status; admissions and enrollment data (including UGPA and LSAT scoring percentiles); incoming class demographics; tuition rates, financial aid, and the cost of attendance; grants and scholarships, including whether they are conditional (i.e., only remain in place if academic standards are met and, if not, are revoked or diminished); curriculum (including practice-ready or clinical courses), class size, and attrition rates; postgraduation employment data; and bar passage rates. As the LSAC recommends, students also should weigh other key variables, such as the school's location, full- and part-time study availability, faculty, library facilities, clinical programs, student organizations and journals, and whether there are any special programs (joint graduate degrees, such as JD/MBA, or one-year graduate Master of Laws [LLM] degrees that can be pursued after graduation). Beyond these considerations, in researching law schools carefully, on a practical level students should investigate the law school's placement record and bar passage rates and, through various means, determine how much student loan debt graduates accumulate during their course of study, along with forecasts about projected debt after law school during loan repayment.⁵⁸

Moreover, a popular but controversial source of information about law schools and their alleged quality is found in the *U.S. News & World Report* (USNWR) rankings (see Table 2.3 for a sample of rankings). Although there are other sites and blogs that “rank” law schools (e.g., Above the Law, Brian Leiter's Law School Rankings, Vault, and others), empirical studies show that the USNWR annual spring publication has an effect on the decision making of both applicants and law schools.⁵⁹ In the USNWR rankings, schools are now ranked into quarter percentiles (past iterations used “tiers”). The rankings contain other information, such as tuition rates and fees, enrollment data, median UGPA and LSAT scores, and acceptance rates (but, in terms of the latter two bits of information, only for a fee). In 2017, the USNWR placed Yale, Harvard, Stanford, Columbia, and Chicago in the top spots. Notably, each has a reported tuition rate (plus fees) in excess of \$56,000 per year for full-time study.

In ranking schools, the USNWR examines a weighted average of several factors: quality assessments (peer assessments and assessments by lawyers and judges), selectivity (median LSAT scores, median UGPA, and acceptance rate), placement success, bar exam passage rate, and faculty resources (expenditure per student, student–faculty ratio, and library resources). Only the top hundred to top three-quarters of the schools are included in the numerical rankings: the rest, all in the bottom quarter of ranked schools, are treated differently (alphabetically listed as “Rank Not Published”). As Table 2.3 shows, the top-rated schools value especially

Table 2.3 Law School Rankings

Rank	School	UGPA/ LSAT	Tuition and Fees	Acceptance Rate
1	Yale University	3.93/173	\$58,050	9.72%
2 (tie)	Harvard University	3.86/173	\$58,242	17.87%
2 (tie)	Stanford University	3.89/171	\$56,274	11.25%
4 (tie)	Columbia University	3.71/172	\$62,274	21.88%
4 (tie)	University of Chicago	3.90/170	\$58,065	21.89%
6	New York University	3.78/169	\$59,330	33.10%
7	University of Pennsylvania	3.89/169	\$58,918	18.80%
8 (tie)#	University of California, Berkeley	3.78/166	\$48,625* \$52,576**	21.18%
8 (tie)#	University of Michigan, Ann Arbor	3.76/168	\$53,112* \$56,112**	27.98%
8 (tie)#	University of Virginia	3.86/168	\$54,000* \$57,000**	20.16%
50 (tie)#	Florida State University	3.52/158	\$20,683* \$40,695**	43.92%
50 (tie)#	Temple University [^]	3.50/160	\$23,336* \$36,336**	43.14%
50 (tie)	Tulane University [^]	3.41/161	\$48,456	51.06%
50 (tie)#	University of California, Hastings [^]	3.50/159	\$48,638* \$54,638**	42.09%
50 (tie)#	University of Houston	3.54/159	\$29,784* \$44,044	38.29%
100 (tie)#	Indiana University, Indianapolis [^]	3.40/152	\$25,625* \$45,210**	69.72%
100 (tie)	Michigan State University [^]	3.46/154	\$39,353	46.36%
100 (tie)#	SUNY Buffalo Law School	3.44/154	\$26,997* \$45,007**	51.65%
103 (tie)	Catholic University of America	3.32/153	\$46,815	55.21%

Rank	School	UGPA/ LSAT	Tuition and Fees	Acceptance Rate
103 (tie)#	Florida International University [^]	3.61/156	\$21,406* \$35,650**	29.19%
103 (tie)	Stetson University [^]	3.28/154	\$40,256	51.14%

Source: *U.S. News & World Report* Rankings (2017) and 2015 ABA-required disclosure reports. 50th percentile UGPA/LSAT reported.

Notes: * Resident; ** Nonresident. # Public school; all others are private. [^] Uses conditional scholarships. A total of 196 schools are ranked, so each of the first three quarters represents 49 schools. USNWR lists the bottom quarter of schools, but does not rank them.

high LSAT scores (a metric that drives law school reputation and rankings, which probably makes it the dominant factor in admissions decisions); and lower-ranked schools accept more students having weaker UGPAs and LSAT scores, a statistic that may help explain related findings by empirical studies showing that UGPAs and LSAT results are important predictors of law school success.⁶⁰

Since their systematic introduction in 1990, the rankings have been extensively looked to as measures of law school quality by prospective students, law school administrators, law faculty, and legal practitioners. Even so, the rankings have been subjected to severe criticism, and students who review them should use an abundance of caution in interpreting what they mean or in relying on them as a basis to select their school of choice. A multitude of investigative exposés, academic studies, congressional hearings, “scamblogs,” *mea culpa* admissions from law school deans, and lawsuits demonstrate that law schools have taken advantage of the ranking system in order to artificially boost rankings.⁶¹

To illustrate the scope of the abuse, Brian Tamanaha’s *Failing Law Schools* (2012) reports that in 2011 the *New York Times*, in an exposé, disclosed that law schools were manipulating their post-JD employment data in order to create the false impression that their graduates were gainfully employed. The reality was that the legal marketplace was in the midst of a recession and the opposite was occurring—essentially, law schools were fudging how they reported the data to remain competitive and improve their reputation, a move that spiraled into other shady (and long-standing) practices that showed that (especially elite or wannabe) law schools vied to boost rankings by (1) offering “bait and switch” conditional scholarships (luring students in on a guarantee of three years of funding but then rescinding the offer when a student cannot maintain the grades to keep it due to “grading on the curve” methodologies), (2) changing their admissions formula, and (3) undertaking expensive promotional campaigns and adopting institutional strategies to inflate the school’s (and faculty’s) reputation, among other things. As Table 2.3 reveals, several schools in the lower ranks still use conditional scholarships in spite of the criticisms.⁶²

Additionally, multiple studies have uncovered how the methodology used by the USNWR to create the rankings is deeply flawed and highly misleading. The deception, in turn, led to lawsuits by disgruntled students that sought civil damages for the harm that was caused to them by law schools that intentionally misrepresented employment data; and, in addition to deans being fired, online blogs publicized the law schools' bad behavior in a brutal and unflattering light.⁶³ Although some critics acknowledge that it makes sense for students to consult the rankings for a limited range of informational purposes, they argue the system that the USNWR uses to rank law schools is "unduly influential" because it "assigns arbitrary weights to incomplete measures, uses uninformed reputational surveys as proxies for quality, and forces schools to compete in an academic arms race that inflates costs." In light of these concerns, the USNWR rankings, and even alternative rankings that are readily available across the Internet such as those from Above the Law or Brian Leiter, must be assessed with a wary eye.⁶⁴

In fact, some legal experts go further to argue that relying on conventional assessments of law schools like rankings is a recipe for failure. For Nancy Levit and Douglas O. Linder, authors of *The Happy Lawyer*, applicants too quickly fall into the trap of thinking that they are "buying a legal education." Instead, choosing a law school should be equated with "buying a peer group" within the law school community that shares the same ethical values and worldview of the applicant. Rather than pick a law school because it has high rankings or can best secure a coveted judicial clerkship, Levit and Linder recommend it is essential to visit the law schools and interact with the students, faculty, and administrators as much as possible, in and outside of classroom visits. Doing so gives needed insight as to whether the law school environment is civil, whether its faculty or alumni are empathetic to the real-life problems of clients and students and not unduly adversarial, or whether the advising or placement services collaborate with students on a one-on-one and not an impersonal basis. In positing that "[l]aw is a people profession" and that it is wise to "[s]earch for a law school where professors understand and teach the importance of social bonds," they maintain it is crucial to find a school that "seems to care about your future and can best guide you to a lifetime of happy lawyering." Thus, they assert that "[b]y far the best indicator of a good law school match" is "how well you like, respect, and trust the students who will become your peers and whether you are stimulated by them."⁶⁵

APPLYING TO LAW SCHOOL

The decision to apply to law school should only come at the end of a preliminary but thorough investigation about the nature of the legal profession and some of the challenges in becoming a lawyer. Understanding the importance of UGPA, the LSAT, educational financing, what lawyers do, and how they are trained (considered more in depth in the next chapter) is essential knowledge that permits a full appreciation for the rewards and challenges that lie ahead. In this regard, the facts and perspective that are gathered about the legal profession before an application is submitted are the foundation for confidently developing a short list of desirable law schools that fit the applicant's qualifications and expectations.

Once the decision is made to apply, the next step is to prepare an application that the law school admissions committee will assess favorably in comparison to

the hundreds of others they will be reviewing in the admissions cycle for the new academic year. In submitting applications, it is always worth bearing in mind that getting into law school is a competitive and time-consuming process. Accordingly, there is no guarantee of acceptance, but if the necessary preparation is done beforehand, the chances for admission success improve greatly. In this section, the logistics for applying to law school are discussed along with some of the special issues that may arise in preparing the application and having to respond to the application if circumstances dictate. Thereafter, the discussion turns to identifying some of the important elements in making a final decision once the admission letters, or denials or wait list notices, start to arrive.

Preparing the Law School Application

Once a working list of law schools has been compiled, the next step is to begin the application process. Students navigating through its logistics should routinely consult with the prelaw advising and career services that are offered through their undergraduate institutions if questions arise or additional guidance is necessary; or, alternatively, LSAC resources and several commercial self-help guides are readily available online or in print for additional consultation.⁶⁶ Since every school has its own admission process, it is imperative to become familiar with each school's requirements early on. For context and review, the general steps and timeline for initiating and completing the law school application are outlined in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4 Law School Application Process

Timeline	Action Required
Freshman/ Sophomore Years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make decisions about prelaw coursework and academic preparation • Perform well academically (high UGPA) • Consult with prelaw adviser and career services • Consult informally with attorneys/judges or alumni who work in law • Read recommended prelaw and law career readings • Join prelaw club and/or other extracurricular activities • After thorough self-assessment, determine if law study or career is still of interest and commit to further preparation or not • Become familiar with LSAC, LSAT, and CAS requirements (and fees) and law school application process • Begin to examine law schools online and in person • Understand cost and educational financing issues • Contact law school admissions personnel and begin to visit schools of interest, including faculty and classroom visits

(Continued)

Table 2.4 (Continued)

Timeline	Action Required
Junior Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin LSAT preparation (200+ hours required) • Create short list of law schools of interest (5–7 ideally) • Attend LSAC Law Forums • Create LSAC account online • Prepare résumé and update continuously • Begin to write personal statement and/or other supplemental essays • Register for June (or September) LSAT and CAS online • Take June (or September) LSAT
Senior Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrange for official transcripts to be sent • Request letters of recommendation from professors and other employment contacts or professionals (no later than spring semester) • Finish and compile required documentation, including addendum (if necessary to explain weaker LSAT score and/or UPGA), supplemental essays (only to select schools of high interest), and dean certification (if required) • Complete and submit law school applications (5 or fewer law schools, ideally, by October for next fall admission) • Explore logistics and do financial cost assessment of schools that offer admission • Make final decision

Source: Law School Admission Council, “Applying to Law School,” accessed August 9, 2016, from <http://lsac.org/jd/applying-to-law-school/overview>.

Although several items of the action plan listed in Table 2.4 transpire in the first two years of undergraduate education, the application process begins in earnest in the third, or junior, year of study. In the junior year, students must direct their primary efforts at preparing for, and taking, the LSAT (which, ideally in June or by the latest September, can be taken for the first time, or as a repeat test if needed, in order to submit an application by next fall); but, other steps, such as beginning the process of writing a personal statement (which explains the personal reasons, and special qualities, for wanting to attend law school) and a résumé or other essays (that should be tailored for law school admission committee review), must be initiated as well. Further, the groundwork for requesting two to three letters of recommendation should already be established by the end of the junior year; that is, before actually requesting the letters in the senior year, students should have already built the foundation for getting written testimonials from professionals (professors, employers, or community leaders) who can speak confidently and knowingly about an applicant’s ability to undertake the rigors of graduate school law school study. In selecting letter

writers, applicants must choose wisely and only ask trusted persons with whom a classroom, work, or community-based relationship has been solidly established, preferably over time. Applicants must also give recommenders sufficient lead time and information to write the references. In order to ease the task and orient the writing, students should supply busy and time-constrained letter writers with a written but brief synopsis of any relevant information that will assist them, such as grade summaries, law school aspirations and motivations, unusual personal circumstances, extraordinary accomplishments or extracurricular activities, drafts of résumés and personal statements, and applicable deadlines and logistics.⁶⁷

Achieving early success in the LSAT in the junior year has the advantage of allowing students to turn their complete attention to the time-consuming process of compiling the extensive documentation that must accompany law school applications. Depending on the school requirements and in accordance with the discretionary choices made by applicants to bolster their files, in addition to forwarding official transcripts and securing letters of recommendation, many applicants prepare personal statements, résumés, supplemental essays, addenda, and a dean's certification (supplying academic information about attendance, majors, minors, UGPA, and the like). Moreover, most applications require disclosure of issues and facts that raise character and fitness issues, such as past academic misconduct or criminal activities, in their records and personal backgrounds. For most applicants, the CAS, which most ABA-approved law schools require students to use, streamlines the application process by collecting and distributing LSAT scores and writing samples, academic transcripts, an admission index (a formula combining an LSAT score and UGPA into an index number, if required by the school), letters of recommendation, and miscellaneous relevant information.⁶⁸

Of the remaining documents, the personal statement is of utmost importance. Generally, personal statements are the vehicle to let applicants explain their personal story and qualifications for undertaking law study. In many respects, they are easy to write if applicants invest the time to understand fully the reasons why they want to be a lawyer—something that should result after undergoing a thorough self-assessment and an investigation of legal profession and law training in the early years of undergraduate study (see Table 2.4). For example, if a school boasts a special program or course of study, applicants will already know how to customize their generic version of the personal statement and use it to get noticed by the admission committee and gain an edge on the competition. Still, even applicants who have done their initial homework may still underestimate the time and effort that goes into writing an effective personal statement. The personal statement is a critical element of law school applications because admissions committees, which read thousands of applications in any given admissions cycle, will quickly disregard statements (and applications, especially if on the bubble) from applicants that are poorly written and do not help distinguish the candidate from others who are vying for coveted seats in a competitive application process.⁶⁹

While many undergraduate institutions and commercial “how to” books may render advice on how to write personal statements, as a rule of thumb students ought to strive for economy (no more than two pages) and originality in writing essays that immediately grab the committee's attention, preferably in the first sentence. This can be done by constructing a personal profile that is interesting and goes beyond a rote

recitation of the raw numbers (i.e., UGPA and LSAT score). By anecdote or otherwise, personal statements should give special insight about an applicant's life, intellect, motivation, maturity, and commitment to law study. A common mistake is to convey how law school will benefit an applicant's life by potentially reaping lucrative employment, personal fame, or financial rewards and the like. Rather, committees are more interested in learning how an applicant's personal skill set and unique experiences will make an enduring contribution to the law school community and the legal profession as a whole. Explanations about weaknesses in the file, such as a weak LSAT score or a less-than-stellar UGPA, should be reserved for the addendum, which applicants add to accentuate application strengths that are not discussed in the personal statements or elsewhere. As with any important writing that will be judged by others, applicants must take great care in preparing it with an outline, multiple drafts, extensive proofreading, and a revision process that enables trusted peers, academicians, and career professionals (with undergraduate institutions) to review and offer grammar, style, or substantive content suggestions.⁷⁰

The same attention to time and detail must be given to completing character and fitness statements (or arranging dean's certifications, if required, that supply academic standing information, including disciplinary or misconduct issues), résumés, addenda, or supplemental essays. All of these elements are designed to increase the chances for favorable admission outcomes in a highly competitive application process. In satisfying character and fitness requirements, applicants must fully disclose all pertinent information lest the committee discover, after the fact, that there is an ethical failing or omission that suggests the candidate is not being up front, transparent, and candid about such misfeasance. For résumés, committees expect to receive polished and professionally formatted writings that are grammatically sound and descriptive of key information, including educational background, work history, volunteerism, travel or military experience, and research interests, among others. Any work or volunteer experience in the legal field should be emphasized in a separate section of the résumé. Addenda and other supplemental essays, on the other hand, are typically optional but selectively target schools of great interest. They serve a number of significant purposes: they may explain UGPA or LSAT weaknesses, or past misconduct; unusual or extenuating circumstances; barriers that have been overcome; interests in a specific school or program; or how an applicant's past experiences have enhanced public service or will contribute to the diversity and quality of the incoming law school class and the profession as a whole.

In addition to written documentation, some, but not all, law schools permit a personal interview as part of the application process (either by invitation, by request, or informally). While some schools disallow or discourage interviews (due to high volume and lack of resources), it is not uncommon for applicants to take the initiative to meet with admissions staff, faculty members, or law school alumni on an informal basis during a school visit or perhaps an extended telephone conversation. As with all parts of the application process, informal interviewing must only occur after applicants have thoroughly prepared for it. Interviewing gives candidates an excellent opportunity to explain the nuances of the underlying application while being exposed to the school's strengths and weaknesses on a firsthand basis. Moreover, what the school learns about the applicant during informal interviewing is often shared with

the admissions committee or placed in the applicant's file for further evaluation. As a result, as one law school dean puts it, interviewing "is well worth the reward, provided prospective students are willing to take the time to prepare."⁷¹

Law school admission committees evaluate applications on a rolling basis, a process that populates the incoming class by making admission decisions on a continuous basis until all the available seats are filled. The system, therefore, rewards applicants who submit their applications well ahead of the application deadline. While schools vary in establishing their deadlines, a common approach is to begin to evaluate applications in the mid-summer to fall time period of the calendar year before the anticipated enrollment date, which typically occurs in the fall semester. As well, some schools offer early decision and early admission options, which accelerates the time frame for applying by several months (typically, by early winter). Early admissions ordinarily advantage two types of applicants: those who know that a specific school is a first choice and, perhaps, those with UGPA and LSAT scores that are outside of the school's normal threshold requirements ("stretch schools" that might be more receptive to applications received early on in the admissions process). While early admission applicants may receive the cost (and reduction of anxiety) benefit of receiving a favorable decision early in the admissions cycle, schools may require that all other law school applications be withdrawn upon acceptance; and any eligibility for deferring admissions to a later date will be forfeited. Therefore, exercising early admission options should be done with extreme care since they exact a commitment that not only dramatically reduces law school choices, but also binds students to attend even though they might not yet be fully aware of their financial aid packages (including scholarships or tuition discounts) on the date they are required to tender a nonrefundable seat deposit.⁷²

CONCLUSION

After reviewing applications, the admissions committee will generally deliver the news that an applicant has been accepted, rejected, or put on a wait list (a form of conditional admission that admits students only when another applicant has been accepted but opts not to attend). Although many schools permit appeals from rejections, the practice is frowned upon unless there is a strong indication that something in the file significantly changed and improved the application from the time of original submission. On the other hand, admissions committees are more receptive to additional input coming from wait-listed students, so long as the communications are not excessive and off-putting. Many law school admission committees, therefore, might look favorably upon a wait-listed student who writes a short letter or note of continuing interest, especially if applicants can point to some improvement in LSAT scores (that might have been earned after original submission) or some other indicia that strengthen admission chances, like the publication of a master's thesis or other accomplishments.⁷³

As alluded to earlier, it should be borne in mind that, after acceptance, certain highly qualified students may receive competing offers to attend from different law schools, and many schools are willing to negotiate the terms of merit-based financial aid or scholarships. Under such circumstances, the choice to attend a specific school should only be made after doing extensive research and performing a careful

evaluation of what is being proposed in light of student financial needs, personal circumstances, or career goals. A critical element in such negotiations, for example, is determining if the school is conditioning its offer of aid (by grade performance or other criteria), or if the money will not be withdrawn during a student's course of study. Whether a law school offers conditional scholarships is discovered from making inquiries to law schools, or by exploring the ABA's Standard 509 Information Reports and other online sources. Regardless, for accepted students, the preparation that went into applying will have to be redirected with a new energy and vigor to making the transition from undergraduate to graduate law study, a topic taken up in the next chapter.

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WEB LINKS

- American Bar Association (www.americanbar.org)
 Law School Admission Council (www.lsac.org)
 Law School Transparency (www.lawschooltransparency.com)

ENDNOTES

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 62. *Ibid.*, 71–72, 74–78. See also David Segal, “Is Law School a Losing Game?” *New York Times* (January 8, 2011); and David Segal, “Law Students Lose the Grant Game as Schools Win,” *New York Times* (April 30, 2011).
 63. Barton, *Glass Half Full*, 156–159; Tamanaha, *Failing Law Schools*, 75–80. See also Brian Leiter, “The *U.S. News* Law School Rankings: A Guide for the Perplexed,” *Brian Leiter’s Law School Rankings* (May 2003), accessed May 20, 2016, from www.leiterrankings.com/usnews/guide.shtml.
 64. Above the Law, “Top 50 Law Schools 2015,” accessed May 20, 2016, from <http://abovethelaw.com/careers/2015-law-school-rankings/>; Brian Leiter, “Newest Rankings,” *Brian Leiter’s Law School Rankings*, accessed May 20, 2016, from www.leiterrankings.com/new/index.shtml. The quoted material is found in Rhode, *Trouble with Lawyers*, 123.
 65. Levit and Linder, *Happy Lawyer*, 116–123.
 66. Anne K. Levine, *The Law School Admission Game: Play Like an Expert* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Abraham, 2013); Deborah Schneider and Gary Belsky, *Should You Really Be a Lawyer? The 2013 Guide to Smart Career Choices before, during, and after Law School*, 2nd ed. (Seattle, Wash.: Lawyer Avenue Press, 2013); Richard Montauk, *How to Get into the Top Law Schools*, 5th ed. (New York, N.Y.: Prentice Hall, 2011); Anna Ivey, *The Ivey Guide to Law School Admissions: Straight Advice on Essays, Resumes, Interviews, and More* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 2005).
 67. See Renee Post and Sarah Zearfoss, “Letters of Recommendation,” in *Getting into Law School: A Guide for Pre-law Students*, accessed May 19, 2016, from www.admissionsdean.com/downloads/GettingIntoLawSchoolGuide.pdf, 3.
 68. Law School Admission Council, “Applying to Law School: Law School Reports,” accessed August 9, 2016, from <http://lsac.org/jd/applying-to-law-school/cas/law-school-reports>.
 69. See Thomas Lambert, “Writing a Winning Personal Statement,” in *Getting into Law School: A Guide for Pre-Law Students*, accessed May 19, 2016, from www.admissionsdean.com/downloads/GettingIntoLawSchoolGuide.pdf, 6. See, generally, Montauk, *How to Get into the Top Law Schools*, 263–320.
 70. Lambert, “Writing a Winning Personal Statement,” 6; Montauk, *How to Get into the Top Law Schools*, 263–267, 301–320. See, generally, Eric Owens, *Law School Essays That Made a Difference*, 6th ed. (Natick, Mass.: Princeton Review, 2014).
 71. Monica Ingram, “The Law School Admissions Interview,” in *Getting into Law School: A Guide for Pre-law Students*, accessed May 19, 2016, from www.admissionsdean.com/downloads/GettingIntoLawSchoolGuide.pdf, 21.

72. See, e.g., The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law, “Early Decision Option,” accessed February 15, 2017, from <http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/admissions/jd/applying/early-decision-option/>. See also Shawn P. O’Connor, “Pros and Cons of Applying Early Decision to Law School,” *U.S. News & World Report* (September 10, 2012), accessed August 9, 2016, from www.usnews.com/education/blogs/law-admissions-lowdown/2012/09/10/pros-and-cons-of-applying-early-decision-to-law-school.
73. In addition to admits, rejections, or wait list decisions, some schools use “administrative holds” (indicating a school could not make a decision within a certain time period in the admissions cycle, but signaling that an admission is a possibility later on). Montauk, *How to Get into the Top Law Schools*, 419–431. See also Shawn P. O’Connor, “5 Tips for Getting off the Law School Wait List,” *U.S. News & World Report* (March 4, 2013), accessed August 10, 2016, from www.usnews.com/education/blogs/law-admissions-lowdown/2013/03/04/5-tips-for-getting-off-the-law-school-wait-list.

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